Bigenderism is a False Dichotomy?

Bigenderism is the notion that there are two genders that define any human being. Bigenderism is the traditional idea of male and female. There are many negative ramifications that bigenderism brings about. This is the position that Miqqi Alicia Gilbert argues in her essay, “Defeating Bigenderism: Changing Gender Assumptions in the Twenty-first Century”, that bigenderism is an unhealthy dichotomy that eliminates an individual’s potential to be an individual. Every individual will be a male or a female individual. There will always be associations with gender that pervade our social conceptions as long as we recognize that there are two sexes. “Eliminating the categories themselves is one way of eliminating the sexism that depends on them. There may be other ways to achieve feminist ideals, but the banishment of bigenderism and heteronormativity also eliminates homophobia and transphobia.” (Gilbert 7). Gilbert argues that this is an unhealthy categorization, because it ultimately prevents humanism in the form of individualism. Gilbert recognizes that her proposal may seem radical, and that it will take generations to be able to remove sexual categories from our social structure.

Gilbert professes that a utopia would only be possible without gender affiliations, because gender affiliations will always produce some sort of valuation between the genders. Therefore, as long as gender is considered as a defining factor to one’s identity there will be gender evaluations. She proposes a radical conclusion, and posits that a genderless society
would warrant sexual preference of one type of genital to the other as significant as preferring, essentially, brown hair or blond: “If there were no categories of woman and man, there would be no transsexuals and cross-dressers, no homosexuality. Preferring sexual partners who have vaginas rather than penises would not mean anything more than preferring someone taller than you or someone with a small nose. In a degenitalized world, sex category no longer exists.” (Gilbert 17).

Bigenderism creates many problems for all of society, Gilbert argues. There is not a possibility to achieve the actualization of one’s individualism apart from being associated with one’s gender. Gilbert argues that it is not only those who are unable to fit into a gender category, such as transsexuals or those who are born with disfigured genitalia. The majority of society are negatively affected by bigenderism. There are strict gender expectations that males and females are expected to fulfill, and these expectations are rarely met. Thus, the individual spirit is rejected because of failure to meet or excel within gender classifications. Gilbert intends to prove that without gender, there will be freedom to thrive as an individual. She proposes three models of bigenderism and then rejects all three. Gilbert outlines three models of how society could theoretically approach the issue of bigenderism. She states that the first model is one called strict bigenderism; the second is soft-bigenderism; the third is non-biary genderism. Gilbert proposes, non-genderism.

Our expectations of gender have evolved sociologically and biologically over all of human history. However, Gilbert does not see these gender affiliations as natural, and that these expectations, because of gender affiliation, are social constructs. These expectations are in line with traditional social valuations of masculine over feminine traits, and Gilbert refers to
the high school paradigm in which jocks pick on nerds for being wimps or sissies: “Bigenderism says that there are specific ways to be a woman and specific ways to be a man. If you fall outside those parameters, then you are just that, an outsider. Yes, as you grow older you may find your way, and values may change, but that early path that one is forced to walk, no matter what successes are achieved in later life, it will always be the one you were forced to walk.” (Gilbert 8).

The words wimp and sissy have derogative feminine associations and apply to males who fail to meet the expectation of what is “male”. Therefore, Gilbert concludes that: “Yet we allow ourselves to be saddled with a system that discriminates amongst the majority of the population, because the majority of us fail to match up to the extremely stiff standards that bigenderism demands. Nonetheless, we continue to “do” gender in our daily activities, detailed as they are down to the finest minutae.” (Gilbert 9). We act against our best interests while maintaining gender-separation ideology in our daily actions. These actions can include our way of speech talking, walking, hairstyles, etc. Gilbert argues that these distinctions are not natural. Rather, that they are social constructs that benefit men who have masculine traits. We are promulgating our own discrimination by maintaining a bigenderism system that essentially discriminates against those who are sustaining it.

In order to combat bigenderism and remove its harmful implications, Gilbert outlines three models for traditional social ideas about gender. These models are all unacceptable to Gilbert, as she then professes a fourth model, her preferred model, non-genderism. The first model that Gilbert describes is “Strict Bigenderism”. This model is the least preferred, for Gilbert. She states: “Bigenderism is a trap: first, it declares that one must belong to one of the
two genders, and then judges the great majority not to be up to the standards of the gender to which they are assigned.” (Gilbert 7).

In this first model there is a tripartite structure: “Strict Bigenderism maintains: [a] binary gendered distinction, [b] a higher valuation of male and masculine, and [c] a strict relationship between sex and gender.” (Gilbert 14). This tripartite structure is the one most like our social conception of gender currently. Although we may be advancing some small steps towards gender-neutrality in so much as same sex marriages are becoming recognized; however, this does not remove the gender affiliations that are associated with traits that belong to one sex or another. There has been no removal of the masculine preference, only an acceptance of personal taste.

In the second model, Soft Bigenderism, there are two of the first three elements: lacking the relationship between sex and gender. “Soft Bigenderism maintains: [a] binary gendered distinction, and [b] a higher evaluation of males and masculine.” (Gilbert 14). In this model, there are still the same problems that happen with strict bigenderism. There is a higher valuation of things masculine than feminine. A good example of this socially driven gender valuation is how one reacts to cross-dressers. This valuation “…explain[s] why male-to-female cross dressing is considered psychiatric, while female-to male cross dressing is not. The pervasive idea that masculine is better than feminine…” (Gilbert 12). There is a positive connotation to masculine traits and negative, or inferior connotations of feminine traits. Gilbert maintains that this bigender model is one that accounts for sexual taste, only because this model does not discount the possibility for homosexuality. However, there are still the associations and connotations of homosexuality. These associations are what Gilbert believes
need to be removed in order for there to be any chance for the majority of society to succeed and overcome unnecessary and restrictive gender associations.

The third model, which Gilbert refutes as being insufficient, is one of non-binary genderism. This model has only one of the three components of Strict Genderism. This model has one of the two remaining components of Soft Genderism. This model maintains only the main problem with bigenderism: the preference of masculine over feminine. Therefore: “Non-binary Genderism entails no binary distinction but maintains that masculine characteristics are valued over feminine.” (Gilbert 15). What Gilbert means is that masculinity is preferred as a strength over the weaker feminine conception. This is the basis for all inequality that causes the initial problems for Gilbert: homosexuality, trans-genderism, the strict ideals of feminine/masculine. Therefore, Gilbert must propose a fourth model, one that eliminates the root of the problem.

The only way to eliminate the problems that are intrinsic to bigenderism is to eliminate bigenderism. Gilbert proposes that there is a fourth model that is the appropriate alternative to traditional bigender models: non-genderism. This model has no referent for sexuality, or for differentiation amongst genders: “…non-genderism is one in which there simply is no conceptual apparatus that allows us to define and identify gender or sex. It is an extremely radical model and does away, I maintain, with a host of harmful apparatuses that damage a multitude of people, most especially women.” (Gilbert 13). What Gilbert intends to prove is that there will always be inequality so long as there is differentiation amongst the sexes. Therefore, in order to achieve the objectives an equal, utopian society, there must be
elimination of binary sexual categories. This is why Gilbert rejects all three models; none of
them eliminate the root of the issue at hand.

There needs to be no sexual categorization: “Non-Genderism entails no binary
distinction and no societal valuation on making masculine more highly valued than feminine.”
(Gilbert 16). The world without gender is a strange one to conceive, and Gilbert professes that
she understands that her notions are radical and would take a long time to implement such
radical change. However, she contends that in order to do so, we must support all efforts aimed
at achieving a non-gender goal. “I began by talking about the connections among bigenderism,
sexism, and heterosexism, but I hope it has become clear that in many ways the first is a
component and consequence of the latter two. The freedom that is required is the liberty to be
a person, a simple, ungendered, and individuated person.” (Gilbert 18). Therefore, Gilbert’s
ultimate purpose is to free the individual from the ties of gender classification.

Gilbert asserts that the benefits of non-genderism are many: “With non-genderism there simply
is nothing that is, say, feminine: not a way of talking, walking, dressing, thinking, or
communicating. These ways of behaving, of course do still exist, that is a person might be
nurturing or aggressive, but there is not further associations of them with gender category.”
(Gilbert 16). Therefore, Gilbert asserts that non-genderism satisfies the individual equality,
separate form gender, that all binary gender models cannot provide. There is not a binary
gender model that would allow for equality. The notions of removing all gender affiliations is
one that would provide no context for gender, and therefore, no context for inequality.

Gilbert makes many assumptions that I disagree with in this argument. For one, she
supposes that the majority of society is affected negatively by bigenderism. I do not see that
there are inherent negative effects of bigenderism. I see the binary relationship as complimentary rather than contradictory or dichotomous. I am not certain if Gilbert takes into consideration that there is a biological necessity for gender differentiation. Truly, if Gilbert’s theory is applied, it is plausible that there would be an overriding preference for vaginas over penises, or vice-verse.

Questions this essay asks of Gilbert’s claims are: If there were no sexual association that gender, then what would sexual choice be based on? What if, in an effort to establish equality and freedom of sexual choice devoid of sexual classification, there emerges a trend that is overwhelmingly unisexual? This is a possibility given the equality and freedom of choice and non-classification. Would there be a last generation if there were no sexual recognition?

I would counter-argue that binary relationships are not necessarily unequal, and that there is such the notion as halves. Therefore, she makes a slippery slope argument when she argues that removing sexual classification is the only means for offering a plateau for equality. There are differences in the adjudication of sexes from the perceiver and from the internal identification of the individual: therefore, instead of proposing a solution that seems like it could have been proposed by the propaganda of *A Brave New World*, one should focus on an immediate solution that recognizes the putative equality of the sexes. What I mean is that there are actual differences between the sexes, but these differences are not inequalities, but differences. To ignore them, and merely ascertain that some individuals will behave sympathetically or aggressively but to strip the gender association with those traits is preemptive.
This essay would suggest that a Daoist-type approach be taken regarding the sexes. The differences are complimentary and not destructive to each other’s interests. In fact, each difference relies on the other to compensate in some manner; there is an assured relationship. This relationship is sound; it assures longevity. However, if one removes all sexual context, it may be possible that there will be no cause to reproduce. Like a fad that sweeps through all humans, only one sex might be found attractive, and therefore, by omission of the necessity for the other sex to participate, it is possible that there would only be one gender.

Indeed, the problems of homosexuality and other gender related social issues would be eliminated, but then too, would the subsequent generation. This threat, or ultimatum, is not any more ridiculous than the argument proposed herein, so it is necessary to take the argument to the logical extremes. Moreover, it is even more possible that a generation of masturbators and narcissists could be promoted; the next inequality would remain to be eliminated would be the expectation that one has any sexual relationship. The division of the self with any social-relationship demands could permit stagnation that is unhealthy to the human race. This stagnation is much unhealthier than the supposed discrimination of those who might not uphold traditional gender conceptions.

This essay concludes that the objectives of Gilbert’s thesis are respectable, but her methodology is too radical for reality. There is evidence that modern society has recognized that the perceived gender roles, as far as financial earning power or sexual preference, should not be mediated based on gender. However, to propose that society should annihilate all gender associations is not a possibility that seems plausible. Moreover, the logical extremes of
this application reveal that it might be a theory that uproots the natural biology of sexual selection; thereby promoting unisex preference or no preference.

The inherent dangers of Gilbert’s thesis far outweigh any benefit. Our society is capable of allowing an individual the freedom of self-expression. Although Gilbert argues that sexual classifications are limiting because the individual must necessarily define the self as a male- or female-self, it is possible that there are no limitations to the ability to choose and moderate perception of the two. Therefore, this essay concludes that bigenderism has no inherent inequality, and to eliminate it would dangerously threaten any necessity for sexual selection.
Works Cited